

**State of the City Address**  
**MAYOR SHANE T. BEMIS**  
**February 11, 2009**

Members of the Gresham City Council, elected leaders, citizens, city employees, and friends of Gresham thank you for the opportunity to deliver the 2009 State of the City Address.

There is no question that we have had quite a year.

I'll say right up front that the pains of our economy have caused me some of the greatest distress I have had for our nation and our city. I'll also say that the dedication and passion of our citizens and City staff have provided me with some of my proudest moments.

We have a very strong and experienced team of Councilors. Shirley Craddick, Paul Warr-King, and David Widmark just successfully stood for reelection, and re-join Councilors Nieslen-Hood, Bennett, and Strathern on our team.

This is easily one of the strongest Council's I have had the pleasure to serve with. The mayor often gets the spotlight on City issues, but the Council deserves a lot of credit for their leadership and commitment. Serving in this capacity takes many hours each week, and we all do it without compensation.

In addition to strong elected representation, we also have a dedicated city staff. Just a little over a month ago we experienced our worst weather-related crises in 40 years. The brave men and women of our Fire Department fought their way through snowdrifts to save lives. Our top-notch police officers maintained the safety of the public despite the severe conditions. We had tremendous commitment from our transportation crews, maintenance crews, and emergency managers, and the National Guard came through for us in a really big way.

We had local churches open their doors to keep people warm as temperatures plunged to dangerous lows. These Warming Centers, operated by caring, good-hearted volunteers, literally saved lives. People like this are what make Gresham great.

Minutes after I briefed the press regarding our emergency declaration, we had good Samaritans driving the ice-covered streets in chained up four-wheel-drives, just to help pull cars back onto the roadway and get their fellow citizens home safely. Local auto dealers called up to offer 4-by-4 vehicles, and snowmobile clubs called with offers to help. We witnessed new heights of unity from our residents.



We had police officers, fire fighters, emergency workers, transportation crews, and maintenance personnel working around the clock and on a holiday, without a single complaint about being fatigued, or being away from their friends and family. That wasn't because they weren't tired, or didn't wish that they could spend Christmas with loved-ones. It was because they cared so much about the mission of city service delivery that they gave us every ounce they had.

Realizing in the throes of the moment that we had residents in need of vital life-supporting prescriptions, city staff quickly put together a plan to publicize an emergency prescription number and make those deliveries to our citizens. As a city government, we aren't usually in the prescription delivery business, but lives depended on it, and we were ready to answer the call.

I recall this memory because in a single example it demonstrates every reason we feel called to public service, and why, especially in the tough times, serving others is still the greatest endeavor.

Unfortunately, declining economic activity has negatively impacted our revenue forecasts, and our budget projections indicate that our General Fund could be off as much as \$4.5 million in FY 09-10. This means that we are being forced to look at substantial layoffs, which will be deep enough to impact almost all of our service areas. Needless to say, the City Manager, Budget Committee and the City Council have a very difficult job ahead.

Once again we are being called to provide public services with less staff and less money. But it is in times like this that we need to hold tight to the principles of public service that brought each of us to this room today.

It is also important to remember that we've been here before. Whenever these worries begin to nag at me, and whenever I start to think that the sky might be falling, I look up at that wall right there and realize that we have been through a lot as a community, and we always come out the other side even more persistent to see positive developments in our city.

Mayors Cleveland and Elkington fought our way through most of the Great Depression.

Mayor Hughes held the gavel when the United States entered World War II in 1941, and watched many young men in the community get drafted for service.

Mayor Dowsett saw the leader of the free world succumb to an assassin's bullet in 1963, and a civil rights leader with a dream meet the same fate in 1968.

Mayor McRobert saw the timber crisis of the early 90's, and the recession our country experienced during the same time period.



And my predecessor, Mayor Becker, saw the tragic terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 against the United States of America.

Here we are today, gathered in this room on February 11, 2009, Gresham's 104<sup>th</sup> birthday. There is no doubt that in Gresham's 104 years we have seen amazing shifts, changes, and challenges in our nation and our community.

Whenever I start to get discouraged, I remember that we have emerged from each of these challenges just a little bit stronger, a little bit smarter, a little more savvy, and always a little bit more together.

The challenges in our world seem so substantial that we have few tools at hand to address them. But lest I get down, Margaret Mead's famous words come to mind: "Never believe that a few caring people can't change the world. For, indeed, that's all who ever have."

Joining me in this room are those few caring people, and that is why we examine the State of our City today with great optimism.

In these difficult times I want to ask you for your most important commodity. No, not your money -given the economy, it is my recommendation that we not seek any utility billing increases this year or the creation of any new taxes.

I am asking for something much more important and much more personal: your time and talent. I believe that the only quality that can deliver us to the other side of these treacherous waters is our collective personal commitment.

Today I echo our nation's call for a new era of service. We are asking you to be involved in ways in which we have never involved citizens before, and we are launching new initiatives to creatively address old issues, recognizing that money will not be one of our solutions this year.

I ask for your help in one of our most important service areas: the safety of our public.

Let me be perfectly clear: Fighting crime is still my top priority.

A year ago I spoke of the dedicated participation of the men and women who served on the Blue Ribbon Task Force for Community Safety. We spoke about the ideas and initiatives that they brought forth, and the need for more "boots on the ground" to combat our issues with crime.

In response to their call, we asked the voters to help fund additional police officers. Unfortunately, our ask came at the exact time that the severity of our economy began really taking shape.



I want to thank all of the volunteers who carried the charge of trying to get more officers on our streets. In particular, I want to recognize Dwight Unti and Cory Williamson, who co-chaired the effort and gave tons of time and energy to the campaign. I also want to point out Joan Albertson and Travis Stovall who were also instrumental, and helped the effort tremendously each step of the way. These individuals deserve our great appreciation, and a round of applause.

Unfortunately, the levy failed, albeit narrowly, falling victim to an economy that has also threatened the jobs of some of our best friends, neighbors, family members, and the viability of some of our favorite businesses. So now we pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and ask our citizens to contribute their time instead of their money.

In the next few months we will be launching a far-reaching new volunteer initiative out of our Police Department, coined *Citizens in Policing*.

We will be assembling teams of community members to patrol our parks, trails, commerce centers, and public spaces.

These *Citizens in Policing* will be the eyes and ears of our police department, will wear highly visible indicators of their role, will be equipped with radios for direct communication with the PD, and will help us protect our parks and community spaces.

These volunteers will be dedicated to combating the “Broken Window Theory” of public safety, which says that small erosions in our community spaces can have very large affects on crime levels and the criminal element. To put it simply, if we give an inch, criminals will take a mile. Therefore, we will not give an inch.

We need you for this effort. Please ask your family, friends, neighbors, church congregants, and business associates to get involved and help us protect the city that we love. Perhaps your church or neighborhood association would be willing to form a team and adopt an area of our city to love and protect.

In addition, we will also be using these volunteers to help improve the visibility of our police department in our residential areas. One of the items that the Blue Ribbon Task Force wanted to see the most was a greater Police Department presence in our neighborhoods. With a minimum staffing level of 7-12 officers on patrol at any given time, this is exceptionally difficult to provide.

And that is why we will be using our new *Citizens in Policing* program to help with this effort as well. We will be working with volunteers to actually put citizens in patrol cars and get their eyes and ears into our neighborhoods.



These specialized volunteers will first need to graduate from our Citizen Police Academy, be selected through an interview process, and pass a relevant background investigation, and then they will be equipped with radios, specially marked patrol cars, and will communicate directly with the Police Department. They will not carry guns, will not make arrests or write tickets, and will not confront suspects or participate in altercations. Think of them as well trained and well equipped neighborhood watch captains.

We also need your help in the Fire Department. We currently use Fire Corps volunteers to help deliver mail and supplies for the Department. In the coming months we will be expanding that program to use specially-selected, non-firefighter volunteers to help deliver air tanks and fire supplies to the scenes of fires or emergencies of extended duration.

Again, these programs depend entirely upon your participation to succeed. Engage those around you, search your hearts and your calendars, and see if this is the type of effort that you would be willing to give some time to. If it is, contact information will be available on your way out today. Give us a call and let us know of your interest to step up and help.

While we need the direct service of volunteers to help improve public safety in our community, we also need your advice. Though the Blue Ribbon Task Force has wrapped up its initial work, we need to continue to hear from our citizens and involve them in our Police and Fire Departments.

A subcommittee of City Councilors, under the leadership of Council President Dick Strathern, has been working very hard to reinvent our citizen advisory committee structure. In short, they have created the industry's best practice out there.

The final committee to be seated is the Public Safety Committee, which will work with our Police and Fire Departments, and will contain subcommittees focused on the Police Department and Fire Department individually.

We will be holding an informational community workshop in the coming weeks to prepare for the launch of this committee, and will then conduct interviews with interested participants and make appointments to the committee. If you are interested in serving in this advisory capacity, please let us know.

Now as you might imagine, we do have one local citizen who turned us down on the offer to join the advisory committee before we even asked. That's right, former Police Chief Carla Piluso let me know that she isn't interested in that opportunity. Kidding aside, I do want to recognize Carla's nearly 30 years of service to the Gresham Police Department. There is no question that Carla loves this community and has given it her life. We were fortunate to have her service, and are fortunate to still have her dedication and passion in our City. Please give Carla a round of applause.



And I could not possibly speak to the important new directions we are exploring in public safety without tipping my hat to our new Police Chief, Craig Junginger. Though he's been here only a couple months, we are already seeing the energy, experience, knowledge, creativity and commitment he is bringing to the Department. We're lucky to have him, and we thank the citizens for taking part in the selection process and helping us pick him. It was very important to me that this Police Chief be your Police Chief.

Finally, on the topic of public safety and fighting crime, I want to make a very direct appeal to our Neighborhood Associations. Too often these groups -with the best of intentions- get mired in the minutia of City Hall, and neglect the important task of creating community and having neighbors help neighbors.

Neighborhood Associations have been strong partners in some of our land use issues. As many of you know, in the past year we were busy making landmark -and long overdue- revisions to our development code. We ended the gerrymandering of creative lot divisions, which were putting density where we didn't want it, and threatening to erode the livability of our neighborhoods.

We created a Design Review Commission, comprised of some of the most creative architecture, design, and development experts in the industry. This Commission will help us maintain our high standards for future development.

Moreover, we just completed the Residential District Review, which made important zoning changes that help protect the reduction of lot sizes and harmful infill in our vibrant and historic residential areas. I think it is fair to say that we have pushed the envelope on these issues and reached heights of creativity that will help keep Gresham a great place to live.

The role of the Neighborhood Associations in these decisions was critical, and with their help we made great strides in livability. That said, there are many factors other than land use that have direct and critical impacts on livability, and it is vital that our neighborhoods step up and rally to those issues as well.

I want to directly challenge our Neighborhood Associations today to put as much or more effort into forming and supporting strong Neighborhood Watch programs in 2009 as they put in to monitoring land use issues. The circumstances are too critical to ignore any areas of livability, and we can't address our crime and safety issues without partners.

While we will be calling on citizens in whole new ways to help fight crime, we will also be reaching into the toolbox of creativity at City Hall to find revenue-neutral approaches to the issue.



In the coming months we will be forming a cross-departmental “Broken Window Task Force” comprised of police officers, fire-life-safety personnel, code enforcement officers, rental housing inspectors, the City Attorney’s Office, and other relevant staff. This group will be dedicated to attacking the worst of the worst out there, again with the “Broken Window Theory” in mind.

The Broken Window Task Force will vigilantly work with property owners to either clean up their properties, mitigate hazards, and end their nuisances, or face fines, liens, and law enforcement.

Unfortunately we don’t always have the ability to control the economic conditions that allow properties to degrade. However, it is not fair or equitable for all of the other taxpayers in the City to pick up the tab when a small handful of properties generate chronic nuisances or vastly disproportionate demands for service. This program will help us pass along some of those direct costs to the properties that cause them.

If your house or rental property requires police attention nearly every night, this message is for you: We’re coming and we’re bringing all we’ve got.

While new programs will help us address these issues from multiple angles, community amenities can also provide creative public safety solutions. The ever-nearing development of our Skate Park is on the horizon. We continue to pursue grant funding and support for this long-overdue community asset, which will give our youth another healthy alternative to boredom and delinquency. Gresham families will be happy to hear that we are scheduled to start construction this summer, and complete the project this fall.

And no discussion of public safety would be complete without mentioning our deep gratitude for the heroes in all of our emergency services, from police and fire personnel to our soldiers serving at home and abroad. The Heroes’ Memorial adjacent to Main City Park will be a great asset to honor these individuals. We thank the volunteers who have worked so hard to make this a reality, seeking donations, and giving freely of their time and passion to recognize the heroes in our community.

In addition to pursuing public safety solutions within our own agency, we will also continue to work with our regional partners to continually improve the safety of our community. We have recently engaged in a multi-agency effort, “Operation Cool Down”, which targets gang violence where it exists, understanding that gangsters and thugs see no city limit boundaries, and that violence in Northeast Portland can have repercussions in Southwest Gresham.

We will also continue our vigilance with TriMet. Last year I announced that we had agreed in concept to a precinct model to get TriMet police officers out of their patrol cars and onto light-rail trains and platforms. I am happy to say that the East Precinct is now up and running, and we continue to receive positive feedback from riders regarding the new police presence.



Our partnership with the Multnomah County Sheriff's office to get the jail work-crew removing graffiti continues, and has literally been responsible for the removal of thousands of pieces of graffiti across Gresham. This, coupled with our continued volunteer graffiti removal teams, has made a huge difference.

In addition to enhancing our volunteer opportunities and regional partnerships, we will review and evaluate our development code in Gresham to ensure that new construction is built with public safety in mind. Sight-line visibility, lighting, and other elements will be carefully reviewed to help us create new development that will have as small of an impact as possible on our public safety resources. If changes to the code are necessary to accomplish this, they will have my full support.

While public safety remains a top concern, so too is the importance of developing a vibrant community, a top-notch education system, and redoubling our economic development efforts.

One of Gresham's greatest assets is its balance. While we host 100,000 citizens, two major semiconductor companies, and one of the world's largest aerospace manufacturers, we also have a small town character and civic pride that is second to none. We have the Teddy Bear Parade, Art Walk, Car Show, Mt. Hood Jazz Festival, Spirit of Christmas Celebration, and a seasonal Farmers' Market.

I believe that people want to live in a place that has gained a cosmopolitan edge without losing its hometown feel, and I think that Gresham is just such a place.

Further proof is provided in our new downtown Arts Plaza. Every good city with a small town feel has two things you can always count on: a special place to light a Christmas tree, and a grumpy town curmudgeon. Well, this year we got both.

We moved the tree lighting to the Plaza, giving the public a feel for this fantastic new community space. Well, former City Councilor Jack Horner seemed to think that the tree wasn't large enough, and true to his nature, he made his opinion known. Sharon Nesbit caught wind of this, and named Jack the official City of Gresham town curmudgeon in the Gresham Outlook. Jack Please stand and be recognized for helping contribute to the well-roundedness of our community.

In all seriousness, we know that public spaces like this spark community activity and development. I am confident that Gresham residents and visitors to our city will celebrate this space together for years to come.

The same day that we broke ground on the Arts Plaza, we began the long-awaited construction of the Sports Park, a new public space for our children to seek fitness, teamwork, recreation, and community. This project had been in the works for years, and I could not be more proud to see it come to fruition.



And while we celebrate our fantastic amenities, we are simultaneously working on lifting the areas of need in our community. Our Rental Housing Inspection Program has taken shape, conducting over 315 inspections, and initiating over 400 repairs and improvements to properties. This sea change is undoubtedly raising all the ships, and the program is literally helping to lift the quality of life of our residents, and the fabric of our community.

In addition to being attracted to our sense of community and our fantastic amenities, I believe people want to be part of a place that has strong schools, focused on preparing our students for life and advancing their education.

We have great confidence in our local superintendents, and I appreciated the recent opportunity to meet with them, along with Dr. Ski from Mount Hood Community College. We discussed how to work together to reduce our high school dropout rate. A loftier goal I cannot imagine, but the future of our youngest citizens depends on it.

Last year I spoke of my optimism for Mount Hood Community College as they conducted their search for a new President. This year, I am happy to say that it looks like they did a great job. Dr. Ski has been a solid partner in our economic development efforts, and stands poised to help train the workforce needed to attract new development. He keenly started his service here on what he called a “listening tour” and I think it is safe to say that he heard us.

As we focus on education and on graduating our students and training our workforce, we also need to focus on having jobs for them to enter. Never before has the argument for strong economic development efforts been easier to make. The answer to many of our issues rests in our efforts to attract jobs and economic investment.

Nobel Prize winning economist Paul Krugman, on a recent trip to the metro area, suggested that this may not be our father’s recession, but instead could look more like our grandfather’s. Those are troubling words. But when faced with the choice to let this prospect get us down, or to do all we can to support each other and mitigate those harms in our city, the choice is easy.

This is why we have redoubled our efforts on economic development, knowing that we have prime industrial land that is exceptionally well-suited for the sectors of the economy most likely to show growth in the near-term. We have vigilantly marketed the available land adjacent to ON Semiconductor. This nearly 300 acre parcel has attracted the attention of several renewable energy companies. We are told that our site is one of the top available sites in the world. We continue to schedule meetings and site visits with company executives. My commitment to you today is that nobody will work harder to land major economic investment and new jobs on this site than I will.



We have also engaged top policy-makers in our economic development efforts, including the Governor and our US Senators. We have traveled to trade shows to market our available industrial land, and have made some promising connections and contacts. Moreover, we have partnered very closely with the Oregon Economic and Community Development Department, a partnership that will prove vital as we continue to react to leads that they provide.

And as we pursue these leads, it is interesting to note that one of the key items that catches the eye of visiting companies is the City's commitment to sustainability in our operations.

Gresham was recently recognized by the EPA as number seven of the nation's top ten green power communities. Further, we adopted low impact development standards, took the steps necessary to pursue the distinction of Tree City USA, and put in place plans to build one of the largest ground-mounted solar arrays in Oregon at our wastewater treatment plant. When we are pursuing solar manufacturers, items like this make a world of difference.

I have long said that I would put our environmental record up against anybody's, and the feedback we are getting confirms that we are at the head of the field in our collective green ethic. Doing what is right for the environment, it turns out, can also help us gain the attention of companies around the world.

I am also proud to report that we passed the State's first Strategic Investment Zone, which was approved by Multnomah County and the State of Oregon. The Strategic Investment Zone helps us provide incentives to attract companies looking to make extremely large-scale investment.

The idea for this tool was created in the City of Gresham, and it was the City of Gresham that successfully lobbied for its creation in the Legislature. I remain convinced that our available well-served industrial land and our creative incentive tools make us poised to land major economic investment in Gresham, even in these tough economic times.

In addition to aggressively marketing our current available industrial land, we are continuing to seek funding to build infrastructure in Springwater, and prepare the area for what we hope will eventually be one of the region's greatest job-creators. Finding the funding to build infrastructure in urban growth boundary expansion areas is extremely difficult, but we are working with our state and regional partners to find solutions.

We also have much to celebrate in the economic development of our historic downtown. The Gresham Downtown Development Association and the local merchants did a great job getting the Economic Improvement District passed, which will help ensure that Downtown Gresham remains the crown jewel of our City.



To support this extension the downtown business owners had to look beyond tomorrow and see the need to come out of this stronger. As a Main Street merchant, I can speak first hand to the shifts that we have seen in consumer confidence and the flow of goods and services in our economy. I don't need to tell you that it's a very difficult fiscal environment out there. But with dedicated and forward-looking business owners like this to work with, I know that we will come out stronger in the end.

We also just got some good news today from the Small Business Administration. We asked the SBA to provide loans for the businesses in our community that were particularly hard hit by the recent weather disaster. They agreed with our application, and have told us that they will make loans available to help qualifying businesses bridge the gap.

Further, we continue our efforts to create jobs in Rockwood. The Urban Renewal Commission has granted over \$500,000 in industrial improvement grants, which has leveraged over \$26 million of private investment in the area, and created 273 new jobs for our residents.

And finally, we must not forget each of our own personal responsibilities in the economic engine of our community. Now is not a time to buy something on the internet for .50 cents less than you can buy it from a local merchant. If ever there was a time to shop local first it is now. If ever there was a time to show your support to our local businesses, which in turn show their support to our community, it is now.

There are many reasons why buying local first makes a huge difference. Non-profit organizations receive an average of three times more support from smaller, locally-owned businesses than they do from much larger businesses. Local economic activity helps support important public services, like police and fire. And by some estimates, every dollar spent locally catalyzes seven dollars of economic activity in the community.

This is why we will localize our economy, taking care of each other first, and will build community around our fantastic local amenities. We will program our Arts Plaza as actively as possible, and will cheer for our children on the new Sports Park.

We will also be looking to the future, identifying key projects in our Capital Improvement Plan, which will have the double effect of stimulating community and providing local jobs. As we review and update the CIP, we'll be keeping a close eye on projects that stimulate jobs and the flow of good and services. We have also made sure that the Federal Government is aware of our shovel-ready projects for the stimulus plan.

Now is not a time to think of the obstacles that stand in our way, but is rather a time to find solutions.



Now is not a time to focus on the resources that we don't have, but instead to focus on the resource that we do have: each other.

Now is not a time to blame others for our issues, or seek to escape our responsibility. Instead, now is a time to step up and give even more of our time and talent to our community.

Now is a time to work harder than ever, more creatively than ever, and with as much optimism as we've ever had.

Now is a time for us to renew our community spirit, our connection to each other, our relationships, our personal health, and our belief that serving others is what it means to live in Gresham.

This is why I proudly declare again my optimism for the future of Gresham: There will no doubt be another 26 mayors in the future to match the 26 already on that wall, and they will no doubt face adverse circumstances and really hard times to go along with the times of great joy and growth. The reason that I am confident that these men and women will be successful is that they will have rooms like this, full of kind, caring, good hearted people poised to answer the call of their city.

They will make calls to service, like I have today, and will ask citizens to provide for the needs that the day demands. The community will step up, like it always does, and will do what it takes to keep Gresham great.

Though our call again is to provide fantastic services in an environment of substantial budgetary constraint, our creativity is not inhibited, our spirit is as strong as ever, and we will do what it takes to maintain our forward progress.

Gresham is no more or no less than the sum of our collective goodwill, and I have never seen us show a more united front.

To put it plainly, the State of our City is inextricably tied to the state of our collective perseverance, and that, my friends, is strong.